BASIC EQUITATION

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ERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE / COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES / THE UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT, STORRS
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Saddle Seat and Hunter Seat

This booklet sets forth the major basic requirements for saddle seat equitation and hunter seat riding on the flat. Riding over jumps and the finer points of more advanced equitation are not given here.

The material presented can supplement that in the booklet entitled HORSES AND HORSEMANSHIP. It is part of the Horse Publications Series published by the Federal and State Extension Services. Anyone who wants to become proficient in riding horses should take serious training under a competent riding instructor.

Seat and Hands

Equitation, or horsemanship, is the art of riding a horse intelligently, gracefully, and well, with the greatest degree of comfort and enjoyment to both rider and horse. The two fundamental principles of horsemanship are a good seat and good hands. Good hands, being the rider's means of control and communication, are perhaps the more important. However, since one cannot have good hands without first having a firm, comfortable, steady seat, the more fundamental requirement for riding in good form is a good seat.

The rider should sit balanced on the horse, in the lowest part of the saddle, leaving a space of at least a hand's breadth between his buttocks and the cantle. His body should be easily erect, balanced on a base consisting of seat, thighs, knees, and stirrups. The rider's back is hollowed, his waist relaxed, head erect, and shoulders square.

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The seat and legs are close to the horse without pressure, knees down and closed against the saddle. The thighs, knees and calves are in contact with the horse. The rider's lower legs are under his seat and rest lightly against the horse slightly behind the girth. Stirrup leathers should hang vertically. The ball of the rider's feet should be on the stirrups. His ankles should be well flexed, his heels down to the limit, his toes out slightly, at an angle best suited to his conformation. If the rider looked down, he would not see his toes. The stirrup leathers should be long enough so that the tread of the stirrup will strike at or just below the rider's ankle bone when the rider's legs are hanging naturally out of the stirrup.

The elbows bend slightly just forward of the body, but hang from the shoulders naturally. The forearms are extended to make a straight line from the elbows through the wrists and reins to the horse's mouth. The hands, separated evenly over and in front of the horse's withers, are closed lightly on the reins and feel the horse's mouth by flexing of the fingers.

The reins should be held in both hands not only for balance but also to obtain the best results from the horse. Sympathy, adaptability and control should be evident in the hands. The hands should be held with the little fingers down, the thumbs up and the knuckles about 30 degrees inside the vertical.

Many hunters have a rather low head carriage. Therefore, hunter seat riders carry their hands low, near the horse's withers. American saddle horses and others commonly shown by saddle seat riders have a comparatively high head carriage. Their riders consequently hold their hands higher. However, both the hunter seat rider and
the saddle seat rider have proper length of rein when their reins and forearms make a straight line from the bit to the rider's elbow. Study the sketches of the ideal hunter seat and saddle seat.

The method of holding the reins is optional. However, one acceptable method of holding the reins of a double-reined bridle is as follows: the snaffle reins are passed under the little finger and the curb reins between the little finger and the ring finger. Both reins pass through the hands, come out over the forefinger, and are held in place by the thumb, with the bight falling to the off side.

Every effort should be made to keep the hands and wrists soft, pliable, flexible, and yielding to the horse's mouth. The wrists should work like a hinged door, and should give and take with the horse's head. The control of the horse should come largely from the movement of the wrists and fingers, while the arms should remain quiet.

This basic position balances the rider on his seat in exactly the right spot on the horse's back, just to the rear of the withers. The rider's center of gravity is almost over the center of gravity in the horse. Therefore, the rider represents the least possible load to the horse and should feel himself "part of the horse."

The rider who has acquired this seat finds that a minimum use of aids is necessary to get immediate and correct response from the horse at any gait. A good rider has a workmanlike appearance, light, supple seat and hands, and gives the impression of effective and easy control.

The aids for the rider are his legs, his hands, his weight, his voice, spurs, and riding crop. A very common fault of the beginning rider is failure to use his leg aids. The rider controls the horse's forehand with his hand and reins; he controls the horse's hindquarters by using his legs. Impulsion comes from the hindquarters. Therefore, the rider MUST use his legs, his seat and his back to keep the horse in forward motion. If the horse is kept moving strongly forward, he cannot kick, or rear, or shy, or run backwards, or suddenly stop. All of these actions not only are unsettling to the rider, but also are dangerous. All of them can be quite largely prevented by vigorous application of the leg aids.

Mounting and Dismounting

There are two main ways of mounting and gathering up the reins preparatory to mounting. Both are considered good form, but the method always seen in the show-ring is as follows. The rider stands, half facing to the rear, opposite the horse's left shoulder. He takes the reins in the left hand, adjusts them so as to have gentle contact with the horse's mouth, places the left hand on the horse's withers with the bight of the reins falling to the off side. He then grasps the stirrup with his right hand, places his left foot in the stirrup, brings the left knee against the saddle, and places his right hand upon the cantle. Then, aided by his left foot in the stirrup and his grasp on the saddle, he rises by springing off his right leg, swings his right leg over the horse, and settles gently into the saddle. Last, he puts his right foot in the stirrup and takes the reins in both hands.

A second method of mounting, one that is easier for most short or awkward people, follows these steps. The rider stands half facing to the front, opposite the left stirrup. He grasps the reins in his right hand with the bight falling off to the off side. He then places his right hand on the pommel and adjusts the reins so as to feel the horse's mouth lightly. With his left hand, he grasps the stirrup, places his left foot in the stirrup, brings his left knee against the saddle, and raises his body erect in the stirrup with the heels together for an instant. He then passes the right leg over the horse and sits lightly in the
saddle. He puts his right foot in the stirrup and takes the reins in both hands.

The description of mounting takes much longer than the act itself. The important thing is to mount quickly, efficiently, and quietly while the horse remains still.

To dismount, the rider may either step down or slide down. However, it is safer to slide down because the left foot has been removed from the stirrup.

Riding at the Walk

Whenever the rider wants to move out from the halt, he must first attract his horse’s attention. This is called “gathering” the horse. The rider gathers his horse by settling in the saddle, by moving his hands a bit, and through his leg action gets the horse’s legs so disposed under him that he can move readily. The rider simultaneously releases somewhat his hold on the horse’s mouth and either presses with his calf or boots the horse lightly with his heel.

The rider is said to be “with his horse” or “in balance” whenever he so disposes his weight as to require the least muscular effort to remain in his seat, and when the weight distribution interferes least with the horse’s movement and equilibrium. This condition of being “with the horse” is the keynote of good riding. The rider’s balance should be entirely independent of the hands and reins. The rider must fit into the saddle and so be attached to the horse. Thus, both rider and horse can move in rhythm, gracefully and comfortably.

When the horse is in motion the rider’s upper body is inclined forward to a degree determined by the speed of the horse and gait. This forward inclination should always be such that the rider remains in balance over his base of support and never gets “behind his horse.” For unforeseen movements by the horse, such as shying or bolting, which tend to unbalance or unseat the rider, security is provided and balance retained by an increased grip of the legs.

At the walk the upper body is inclined forward only slightly more than at the halt. As a result the rider remains in balance. He does not slouch, lean back on the cantle, or get “behind his horse.” The upper body should have the same erect, alert appearance as the halt. For good form, safety, and control, the rider should always keep his head and eyes up and look forward in the direction he is riding. He should not look down at his horse because looking down bends his back, disrupts his seat, and lessens his control. The rider should keep the horse up in the bridle and swinging along at a good brisk, flatfooted ground-covering walk. To do this, the rider must use his seat and his waist. Thus, he has slight motion in the saddle. He cannot be stiff and rigid. His hands must follow the motion of the horse’s head.

Riding at the Trot

To trot his horse, the rider first takes a shorter hold on his reins. He then gives the horse a sufficiently firm signal with his leg to cause the horse to trot.

At the trot the rider’s center of gravity undergoes more varied displacements than during any other gait. With this two-beat diagonal gait there is a decided impact that throws the rider from the saddle. The correct way to ride a trot is by posting. Posting can be described as “rocking” to the trot. More comfort for both horse and rider is achieved by the rider posting or rocking gently from the saddle and easing back into the saddle with the two beats of the trot. When his horse trots the rider’s body is inclined forward more than at the walk.

Balance and grip are the principles of a good seat. At the trot the rider uses his balance from his stirrups about fifty percent and contact with his knees and thighs about fifty percent. The knees and thighs must at all times be in contact with the saddle if a secure seat is to be maintained. The rider’s legs will not swing as he
posts to the trot if his weight is evenly distributed between grip and balance. Posting should be a gently rolling motion in coordination with the horse’s trot, not a forced, labored rising from the saddle to stand in the stirrups.

In show-ring competition in the United States riders are expected to post to the trot on the proper diagonal. This involves posting in rhythm with the horse’s foreleg that is next to the rail. Thus, if riding to the left hand (counterclockwise), the rider should post with the horse’s right foreleg. When the horse’s right foreleg is advanced, the rider posts; when the right forefoot hits the ground the rider is in the saddle. Conversely, the rider posts with the horse’s left foreleg when his horse is trotting in a clockwise direction around the ring. Posting on the proper diagonal tends to keep some horses more square and balanced in their trot, especially in a small enclosure.

When the horse trots the rider must try to keep his hands as steady and quiet as possible, because at this gait the horse’s head and neck remain steady.

Riding at the Canter

The canter is a restrained collected gallop, a three-beat gait. When riding at the canter the rider sits as close to the saddle as possible, with his knees, thighs, and seat in close contact with the saddle. The upper body should be relaxed but erect and not inclined forward quite as far as when the rider is posting to the trot. To regulate the speed and ride at a collected canter the rider must use his hands in rhythm with the horse and “take the horse back” gradually. Then the horse will canter in harmony with the rider’s hands and not against them. No gait requires such light hands as does the canter.

The canter can be done on either the right lead or the left lead, that is, with either forefoot leading. If a horse is ridden in an enclosed ring, he should canter on the left lead when cir-}

cling to the left and on the right lead when he is reversed. This is necessary for balance, comfort, and safety. Hence, in show-ring competition a horse cantering on the wrong lead is penalized in the judging.

Here is the simplest method to take a canter on the left lead. When riding at the walk to the left hand the rider positions his horse at an angle to the rail. He then uses his right leg against the horse’s side, shortens the right rein, and lifts slightly at the same time. This is called using the lateral aids for the canter departure. To take the right lead the rider uses his left leg and left rein.

Speed is not a requisite of the canter. A horse that looks animated enough to run, but which restrains himself at the will of the rider is performing properly. This happens when the horse hits the ground lightly in front, sustains more of his weight in the hindquarters, and canter at a rate of speed very little faster than a fast walk. The old horsemanship saying about “cantering all day in the shade of an apple tree” expressed the desire for a slow, restrained “rocking chair” canter, easy on both horse and rider.

Although the rider may turn his horse either towards or away from the rail when he reverses direction, most show riders turn towards the rail. A good rider on a responsive horse will often execute the schooling figure known as a half-tum in reverse to change direction.

Riding at the Gallop

In the United States the term canter is used to refer to a slow form of the gallop. The horse goes at a rate of speed no faster than he trots, and perhaps even more slowly. When the horse is allowed to gallop on he moves his legs the same way as at the canter. However, he takes a longer stride, lifts the ground with greater force, and goes about twice as fast as he normally trots.
The rider on a cantering horse sits deep in the saddle and maintains contact with the saddle. He sits more nearly upright than at the posting trot.

At a gallop the rider should take up a balanced position by putting his weight on his stirrups and raising his buttocks a little out of the saddle and pushing them to the rear. His weight is brought more sharply forward at the waist. The reins, consequently, are held quite short but without restraining the horse's head. This balanced position takes some of the weight off the horse's back and provides greater comfort for the rider when the horse is going at a strong gallop.

Saddle Seat Appointments

Riders and horses competing in show-ring competition should be properly turned out. Neatness is the first requisite of a rider's attire.

For informal saddle seat classes conservative and solid colors are required. Solid colors include a black, blue, gray, green, beige, or brown jacket with matching jodhpurs (white jacket in season) and derby or soft hat. Boots and breeches also are acceptable but they are not often seen in saddle seat classes.

Even more conservatism is required for evening wear. Solid colors include a dark gray, dark brown, dark blue, or black tuxedo-type jacket with collars and lapels of the same color, top hat, jodhpurs to match and gloves. A dark-colored riding habit with appropriate accessories is also acceptable.

Horses in saddle seat classes must be shown in full bridles. Martingales, or similar tie-downs, are prohibited. Saddles must be of the flat English type. Forward seat and Western saddles are prohibited. Spurs of the unrowelled type, whips, or crops are optional appointments.

Hunter Seat Appointments

Riders in hunter seat classes should wear coats of any tweed or melton for hunting (conservative wash jackets in season), breeches (or jodhpurs) and boots. A dark blue or black hunting cap or a black or brown derby must be worn. Spurs of the unrowelled type, crops or bats are optional appointments.

Horses shown in hunter seat classes may be brought out with snaffle bridles (with or without dropped nosebands), pelham bridles, or full bridles. Martingales are prohibited in classes not to jump, but are optional in classes over jumps and in classes requiring both jumping and hacking. Forward seat saddles are used.

Class Routine

Horses in saddle seat competition enter the show-ring at the trot and proceed to the left hand (counterclockwise) around the ring. On the judge's command the entries go at least once around the ring at each gait. Then, on command, they reverse direction and repeat. The order to reverse may be executed either towards or away from the rail. The entries line up on command and any or all riders may be required to execute any appropriate tests included in the class requirements.

In hunter seat classes not to jump, the contestants enter the show-ring. At the judge's command, they proceed to the left hand at least once around the ring at each gait, then reverse and repeat. The order to reverse may be executed either towards or away from the rail. Light contact with the horse's mouth is required. Entries line up on command and any or all riders may be required to execute any appropriate tests included in the class requirements.
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